

“SURPRISED BY JOY”
1 Corinthians 15
April 24, 2011, 8:30 a.m. Easter
The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

For me, it's not the scene at the empty tomb in John's Easter narrative that grabs me. It's not the angels, or Peter and John leaving the empty tomb puzzled. It's not even Mary's weeping, or John's comic note of Mary mistaking Jesus for the gardener. All this is prelude. The real action begins when Jesus speaks to Mary and she recognizes him, and filled with wonder and amazement, she races down the hill, and through the city streets to the room where the disciples are sitting huddled together trying to make sense of what Peter and John had told them. And suddenly the door is flung open, banging against the wall, and Mary fills the space, her face alight, and her voice, speaking from a place deep within her soul, announces, "I have seen the Lord!"

It really didn't matter, the words she spoke after that, what she had seen and heard, and the gaffe with the gardener. All the disciples needed to know was the look on her face, and the wonder in her voice. New life. A new end to the story. Easter joy.

Joy comes in many forms. For example, there is the joy of homecoming. You've been away on a trip—maybe two days and maybe two weeks or two months, or even years—but there comes a moment when a corner is turned, and all the journeying from that point forward is focused on getting to that place each of us calls home. And then you finally get there, and your heart smooths out with the quiet pleasure of familiar sights, familiar smells, people or critters you have missed, and the comfort of your favorite chair, a cup of tea just the way you like it in your favorite mug. That's a kind of joy, but it's not Easter joy.

And then there's the joy of falling in love: maybe for the first time, maybe a re-falling with the person you've been partnered with for 25 years, but of a moment, you look, and there's a shift, and all of a sudden your heart is dancing a rumba when you didn't even know it knew how to dance. Another kind of joy, but not Easter joy.

Easter's joy is the juxtaposition of darkness and light, joy that comes when you least expect it. Think of a miner buried in a cave for three days in total darkness. He's running out of air, and he ran out of hope the day before, and all of a sudden, he hears a tapping sound. And then it's louder, and then, the smallest beam of light pierces the darkness, and the barest whisper of clean air, and minutes later an end to darkness and hopelessness. A complete reversal of what was thought to be possible. Or the story of the Catholic monk who, when Oliver Cromwell's armies were sacking the monasteries of England, grabbed the crucifix from the church altar and jumped into a cistern to hide. Hours later, he thought it was all for nothing. He thought he would drown there. But just as his legs could no longer hold him up, the wooden cover of the cistern was slid

back, and strong arms reached down to lift him up, and he kissed the crucifix and cried out, “Alleluia. Christ is risen!”

My favorite story of Easter joy concerns a friend of mine named Julie, whose husband was killed in a moment in a traffic accident. For eight months afterwards, she sleep-walked through her life, not tasting the food she ate, or feeling the warmth of the sun on her arms, not caring about her work or her friends or whether she had taken a shower that week. She called herself the walking dead, and it was far too close to the truth. And then one afternoon, for no reason she can name, she was grocery shopping, and she bought a bottle of her one-time favorite wine. She took it home, opened the bottle, poured a glass, and took a sip. And then she called me. She was crying. “I can taste it,” she managed to speak through her tears. “It tastes good.” And she might just as well have shouted “alleluia!” because on that day, she took her first step back into life. And to this day, she can’t tell you why that day, that act, that moment, but it remains one of the significant dividing lines of her life. She could survive even Clyde’s death, and learn to love life again.

There is a line from the Song of Songs, one of the books of the Bible we don’t read often enough, some of us not at all, though it has some of the most beautiful language of all of scripture. We read part of it last Thursday at our Passover meal. “Many waters,” it tells us, “can not quench love, for love is strong as death.”

Love is strong as death. That is God’s message to us this Easter, every Easter. That’s that knowledge that changed Mary’s life on a rocky hillside 2000 years ago and made her run to tell the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” Love is strong as death. Ask the miner or the monk. Ask my friend Julie. There can be life where you thought it to be impossible. Love is strong as death. Christ is risen. Love is strong as death. With God nothing is impossible. Why? Because love is strong even as death.

So sing “alleluia!” Sing it today. Sing it every day. Our God has demonstrated to us the ultimate power. Love is strong as death. And that is God’s first and last and enduring word for us. Shout out “Alleluia!” I mean it. I want to hear you. Alleluia! Thanks be to God. Amen.